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Review of Disciplining Feminism: from Social Activism to Academic Discourse, by E. Messer-Davidow

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Original Citation

Matthews, Sarah H. 2003. "Disciplining Feminism: from Social Activism to Academic Discourse, by E. Messer-Davidow." *American Journal of Sociology* 109(1):264-265.

Repository Citation

Matthews, Sarah H., "Review of Disciplining Feminism: from Social Activism to Academic Discourse, by E. Messer-Davidow" (2003). *Sociology & Criminology Faculty Publications*. 2.

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Ellen Messer-Davidow's argument in *Disciplining Feminism* is that, in the early days of second wave feminism (i.e., the first wave of *academic* feminism), social activism and intellectualism were closely allied, each informing the other. Very quickly the two strands went their separate ways as feminism became part of academic disciplines with their own traditions and rhetoric. What had been initially envisioned as a marriage of theory and practice eventuated swiftly in divorce. Feminist scholars in universities turned to building careers within disciplines and, as a result, were cut off from feminist activists who continued to seek change in the status of women and in society more generally. Messer-Davidow is clear that she thinks the consequences of this divorce were detrimental to both academic and activist feminism.

The author has a unique perspective from which to make her assessment. In the mid-1970s, between comprehensive exams and a dissertation in English, she served as assistant to the president of the University of Cincinnati for two years. There, she learned firsthand how entrenched university bureaucracies were during the time when feminist scholars were finding their place in the academy.

Messer-Davidow begins by describing what women students were up against in four disciplines—physics, art history, sociology, and literary studies. Each curriculum stands more broadly for the sciences, the arts, the social sciences, and the humanities. She identifies the issue for sociology: “As a scientific discipline it needed to maintain a unified core purged of everyday discourse” (p. 37) to preserve sociological discourse from becoming merely social discourse. By the early 1970s, students whose consciousness had been raised by the feminist movement demanded that sociological discourse recognize the legitimacy of social discourse. In sociology and other disciplines one outcome was the documentation of sex stratification and sex segregation. Once documented, however, the architecture of universities prevented change: When it came to blame, who was at fault was too easily sidestepped. Messer-Davidow makes this case

by analyzing the arguments in sex discrimination suits brought by women who have been denied tenure, suits that were rarely won. “The absence of a structure that made all university units responsible and accountable for what they did enabled them to discriminate” (p. 76).

In the middle section of the book Messer-Davidow describes the transformation within universities in the early 1970s from “female studies” to “feminist studies.” Despite the proliferation of programs, professional associations, journals, and presses, the author argues that “feminist studies became a discipline contained by the academy it had set out to transform” (p. 86). Containing feminism meant removing it from the goals of the feminist movement so that it no longer had as its central mission bringing about social change. Feminism may have changed universities, but universities transformed or disciplined feminism. She pinpoints the victory of the academy in 1973: “That was the moment when the new academic-feminist journals began churning out feminist scholarship and the commercial presses backed away from feminist trade books that hybridized the elements of movement and academic discourses” (p. 133). The disciplining of feminism within the academy has made it a “disunified field with a volatile intellectual core and a discordant scholarly community” (p. 213).

In the final chapters of the book Messer-Davidow focuses on activism. Here she describes her experiences interviewing and participating in conservative and feminist organizations that mold college students. Although her report does not meet the standards of good participant observation research, it points to clear differences between the goals and the effectiveness of conservative organizations—well-funded and careful not to challenge young people’s “comfort zones”—and progressive organizations—modestly, often precariously, funded and purposefully challenging young people’s beliefs. The final chapter focuses on the dismantling of affirmative action. Leaving no doubt about where she stands, the author concludes, “I hope this book convinces at least some of you to put progressive organizations and knowledges to work in the struggle over the nation’s future” (p. 289).

For any feminist over the age of 50, the first part of the book is a trip down memory lane. Because memory is both fallible and personal, the larger social context is difficult to apprehend. For me, Messer-Davidow’s account of the fate of the feminist ideas introduced in the late 1960s as they were absorbed by the academy over the next 30 years evoked epiphanies: Things I knew on one level took on new meaning as I saw the bigger picture. This experience was repeated throughout the book. Intentionally “undisciplined,” however, the book fails in the end to cohere. Nevertheless, it provides a lens, even though murky at times, through which to view the past 30 years of social change in feminism, universities, and American society.